

## **AMERICA'S STRANGE SATANIST SCARE**

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**By James A. Haught**

**Silly episodes of religion flare occasionally -- and America's Satanist hysteria of the 1980s and '90s was especially ludicrous.**

**Many fundamentalists thought the moon-and-stars logo on Procter & Gamble soap signified a secret pact with Lucifer. P&G sued born-again Amway dealers who spread the absurd tale.**

**Some evangelicals thought the blue-faced "Smurfs" cartoon show was a ploy to lure children into Satanism. Ditto for the Dungeons & Dragons video game.**

**Still others thought that heavy metal records played backwards conveyed messages from the devil.**

**A few declared that Satanists kidnapped and sacrificed children at Halloween, although no kids were reported missing and no bodies found.**

**All this might have seemed comical -- fodder for late-night television jokes -- except that an ugly wave of prosecutions ruined many lives: Dozens of day-care workers were falsely accused of using pre-school tots in bizarre Satanic rituals, complete with human sacrifice, sex orgies and mystical mumbo-jumbo.**

**Police, prosecutors and courts were sucked into what has been called the "Satanic Panic." Criminal charges were filed against a string of child-care centers and their staffs. There was no actual evidence, only lurid tales told by small children. In fact, some of the tales were impossible -- such as claims of seeing Satanists fly in the sky, or watching a Satanist sacrifice an elephant and giraffe -- but that didn't stop the witch-hunt.**

**Eventually, it became clear that the toddlers had been enticed to concoct weird stories by supposed "counselors" who used suggestive tactics -- such as employing anatomically explicit dolls and asking children to point to body parts that were violated. Meanwhile, some adults -- under hypnosis by a few therapists -- allegedly recalled "suppressed memories" of victimization they had suffered in the past.**

**The peculiar saga started in 1980 when a psychiatric patient named Michelle Smith wrote a book titled Michelle Remembers. It said her psychiatrist (later her husband) helped her recall how she was abused in a**

Satanic cult. Today, the book is considered rubbish -- but it had power at the time.

Soon afterward, a schizophrenic woman accused the McMartin Preschool in Manhattan Beach, California, of being a secret den of Satanism. Interrogators enticed tiny pupils to describe devil-worship, sex orgies, animal sacrifice, travel through hidden tunnels, and being flushed down toilets into torture chambers. Operators Peggy McMartin and Ray Buckey were indicted on 65 counts, and their trial became the longest and most expensive in American history. In the end, both were cleared, and the whole affair was deemed a fantasy. The schizophrenic woman was found dead of alcoholism.

Meanwhile, other Satanic allegations erupted at more than 100 day-cares across America. Prosecutions and horrific charges filled newspapers. Television shows alleging Satanism were hosted by Geraldo Rivera, Oprah Winfrey and others.

One case involved day-care operators Dan and Fran Keller of Texas. They were convicted in 1992 after tots said they were flown on airplanes into Mexico for murderous rituals -- then returned in time for their unsuspecting parents to pick them up after work.

A star witness for the Texas prosecution was cult “expert” Randy Noblitt, who later wrote that 500 American Satanist cells were sacrificing humans, and that President Bill Clinton was the Anti-Christ.

Finally, in 2015, the Texas supreme court voided all charges in the idiotic case. The Austin American-Statesman reported:

“The Kellers spent more than 22 years in prison after three young children accused them of dismembering babies, torturing pets, desecrating corpses, videotaping orgies and serving blood-laced Kool-Aid in Satanic rituals at their home-based day care.”

Eventually in the 1990s, a wave of skepticism discredited the Satanic Panic. Investigative reports found the whole nightmare had been imaginary. Books and movies denounced the hysteria. In 1995, Geraldo Rivera voiced a public apology for his previous Satanism shows.

“Now I am convinced that I was terribly wrong,” he said, adding that “many innocent people were convicted and went to prison.... And I am equally positive [that the] ‘repressed memory therapy movement’ is also a bunch of crap.”

Sexual molestation of children really happens. And a few rare sickos actually abduct and murder tots for prurient thrills. Sadly, the Satanic Panic diverted attention from genuine crimes.

In his landmark 1995 book, *The Demon-Haunted World*, astronomer-skeptic Carl Sagan denounced “repressed ‘memories’ of Satanic ritual

**cults -- in which sexual torture, coprophilia, infanticide and cannibalism are said to be prominently featured."**

**"Something like 10,000 cases are reported annually in the United States in recent years," he continued. "A significant number of those touting the rampant peril of Satanism in America, including law enforcement officers who organize seminars on the subject, turn out to be Christian fundamentalists; their sects explicitly require a literal devil to be meddling in everyday human life."**

**Dr. Sagan said University of California researchers "examined over 12,000 claims of sexual abuse involving Satanic ritual cults, and could not find a single one that held up to scrutiny."**

**And now America's great Satanism upheaval has faded to a footnote of history, forgotten by nearly everyone. It was a crazed time of fundamentalist superstition run amok.**

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